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ABSTRACT

The mass media provide a flood of information about people, ideas, and products. With all this input, the individual is often hard pressed to sort these images into a meaningful framework. This article synthesizes some of the concepts of Kenneth Boulding and Daniel Boorstin concerning the image and its effects on the structure of our lives and society. A model depicting the communication process in terms of the image concept and designed to assist the individual in coping with the image barrage is presented. (TO)

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Robert L. Schrag

A Theoretical Exploration of the Function of the Image in Communication.

Former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew said, when attempting to explain his resignation on national television, that we live in a time when, "the image is everything."[1] Although he was most likely referring to the relationship between a politician's image and the public trust, he touched on a greater truth. We live in a society where we are continually bombarded with images. The mass media provide a flood of information about people, ideas and products. With all this input the individual is often hard-pressed to sort these images into a meaningful framework. Two scholars, Kenneth Boulding and Daniel Boorstin, have addressed themselves to the concept of the image and its effects on the structure of our lives, and our society. The purpose of this article is to synthesize some of their concepts concerning the image, and to formulate a process that will assist the individual in coping with the image barrage.

Boulding tells us that our image is ourself, and the world, which we perceive and structure in a series of if/when relationships, or expected perceptions.[2] For example, the image of a university might take the form of this if/then statement: If you study hard and complete all the assigned tasks, then you will be granted a degree from the university. Or, the image may be a bit broader, as expressed by this if/then statement: If you gain the skills and expertise provided by university training then, by virtue of those skills as reflected in the receipt of a diploma or degree, you will be able to fashion a lifestyle in keeping with their image of a successful life.

Obviously we are dealing with the potential for many levels of images. The image of our relationship with our spouse or to our job is more complex and dictates more concern than our image of the process of garbage collection, unless of course that happens to be our occupation. Boulding tells us that human images are unique in their highly organized and complex structure.[3] Perhaps the best way to divide the complex web of images that makes up human awareness is to deal with them on the level of private, and public or societal images.

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A societal image deals with a number of if/then relationships within the workings of a society. We expect our society to function in certain ways, and these expectations form our societal image. Boulding writes that, "a public image almost invariably produces a transcript, that is, a record in more or less permanent form which can be handed down from generation to generation."[4] One basic element of our public transcript is the Constitution. The Constitution defines the if/then relationships which are supposed to exist in our society. Yet, what happens when the image and the transcript do not interface smoothly with reality? The Constitution is not a merely denotative transcript, but has connotative influences as well. We expect our country and our elected officials to behave in upright and honorable ways. The Viet Nam war, the Watergate conglomerate and current economic concerns have all placed continuing strain on our societal image. This strain results not from flaws in the transcript, but rather from the discrepancy between reality and what, in our private image, we feel reality should be in accordance with the elements of the transcript.

Our private images, according to Boulding, are our expected perceptions of our own life; how we expect things to happen in our home, family, church, job and so forth. A vital aspect of this private image is its reliability. An image which is being continually disproved will either have to be rejected or changed to maintain homeostasis. These private images do not exist in a vacuum, they are directly linked to our societal image. The degree of cohesion that exists between the private image and the societal image is of great importance in maintaining stability in our existence.

The Viet Nam war created a great deal of dissonance between the societal image and many private images. Our societal image told us that if American boys were dying by the thousands in Southeast Asia then the safety of the Free World must be threatened by totalitarian hordes. Yet, information kept pouring in that the government of South Viet Nam was a fascist dictatorship which dealt in heroin, political corruption and repression. The validity of that information is secondary, what is of primary importance is that the information was perceived as truth in many sectors. The resultant conflict between the societal image, the private image and the perceived reality resulted, in this case, in the political death of a President, the flight of thousands of bright young men to Canada, and a populace divided and twisted with self-doubt.

This turmoil was created by a process which Boulding defines as a message hitting the nucleus of an image. All our images, whether societal or private, seem to be based in a central set of values and beliefs. Boulding calls this set of values the nucleus of the image. He also tells us that once

we have established this nucleus we tend to protect it; that images are naturally resistant to change.[5] One way in which we attempt to protect the nucleus of the image in the face of contradictory information is to discredit the source of the information.[6] This process was quite evident during the unfolding of the Agnew affair. When information first began to appear in the media regarding Agnew's crimes, a sizable portion of his supporters attributed the reports to the natural vindictiveness of the press, jealousy on the part of other public officials, or just "damn lies." These positions continued to be held up to the very eve of the resignation, and for some even after. This nucleus defense manuver worked for a time, but for most Agnew's resignation constituted a direct hit on the nucleus of the image. This resulted in the destruction of the image of Agnew as an honorable man for all but the staunchest of his supporters; and in a severe blow to the image of the office of the Vice President for the rest of the population.

How do we go about defining this powerful concept of the image, so as to have a better idea of the forces with which we are dealing? I propose this definition: *our images, societal and private, are made up of groups of elements, selected from our culture, which we have decided to accept as truths.* Obviously this leaves out many of the intracacies of Boulding's discussion, yet for the present purpose it will suffice.

Daniel Boorstin's treatment of the concept of the image provides additional perspective as he deals with the commercial reality which reflects the social and philosophical organization of the society. This treatment centers around a phenomenon Boorstin calls the pseudo-event.

Pseudo-events are happenings created to fill what Boorstin terms our extravagant expectations. We have grown accustomed to having "news" everyday, and the pseudo-event makers; newsmen, show people, politicians, are happy to oblige by cranking out pseudo-events. The pseudo-event is planned, designed to be reported, and the degree of success is measured by the extent of its media coverage. The pseudo-event is ambiguous in relationship to the surrounding reality, and is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.[7] Truth is unimportant to a pseudo-event and can even be detrimental if it destroys the ambiguity of the event. Boorstin states that, "Now the languages of images is everywhere. Everywhere it has replaced the language of ideals."[8] These are images fabricated from elements in our society and represented as reality. There is a frightening resemblance between the deceptive pseudo-event image and the concept of the image as an element of truth, as presented in Boulding's work. In the Boulding work we get the feeling that we create our images in a serious intellectual manner. We can see ourselves dealing gravely with weighty truths and lofty values. Boorstin implies the same process, but informs us

that we are using the insubstantial cotten-candy of the pseudo-event as our building blocks for reality. If we accept Boorstin then we are building a foundationless world, and in times of real crisis or trauma we will find ourselves wallowing, once again, in the shattered remnants of our images.

To apply the building materials of Boorstin to the process supplied by Boulding presents a very unpleasant commentary of the way we shape our lives. However, Boorstin's two hundred and sixty one pages of examples and applications lend unsettling potency to his hypothesis. Is there a way to approach the calm, reasoned Boulding image; in spite of the fog of pseudo-events?

The following model represents my attempt to depict the communication process in terms of the image concept and to share some thoughts for utilization to cope with the image barrage. The elements of the model are defined as follows:

Actualized Image Spheres: These represent the images of ourselves that we present to others by our behavior, and our demonstrated and verbalized beliefs.

Shared Image Overlap: Those elements in the communicators' actualized image spheres which are known to both parties. This element forms the common information referent in the process.

The Environment, Information, Attitude, Situation Box: (EIAS) Communication does not occur in a vacuum. The physical environment, the social situation, the informational orientation, and attitudes towards individuals and ideas are constantly changing variables which greatly influence the process.

External Noise: Those interferences in the EIAS Box which tend to hamper the communications process. Other conversations in close proximity, a loud band, a bad telephone connection, and a weak picture tube are all examples of external noise.

Transceivers A & B: Those individuals or institutions involved in the communications process of sending and receiving messages.

Internal Elements of the Transceivers:

Receivers: Those senses by which the transceiver receives incoming message stimuli,

Initial Decode Process: The initial translation of incoming message symbols into personal denotative meaning.

Unconscious Filter: Those unconscious biases, prejudices, and predispostions which refuse the admittance of certain types of information, and demand the acceptance of other types of information.

Conscious Filter: This filter is "conscious" in two ways. First, it represents a conscious, reasoned attempt to filter fact from fallacy. Secondly, a conscious effort must be made on the part of every individual to construct and utilize this filter; hence a *participatory* model. In essence the conscious filter depicts a personal, dialectical analysis of those elements which make up our societal and private images.

Perceived Image: The ideal self-image, a combination of Freud's concept of the ego and super-ego, the presence of which colors our perception of messages.

Final Decode/Reshape Process: The process by which the message; already broken down into personal denotative meaning, colored by passage through the unconscious and conscious filters, and viewed in light of the perceived image, is assigned final meaning and reshaped or internally restated in personally connotative meaning symbols.

Encode Process: The process by which we formulate our message or feedback into symbols appropriate for transmission to the other, and send them via the selected channel.

Internal Noise: Those physical and psychological interferences within the transceiver which tend to hamper the communication process. A headache, or other distracting illness, and a preoccupation with other information are examples of internal noise.

Channel (C): The means by which transceivers send and receive messages, speech, pictures, telephone, television, etc.

Content of the Channel:

Message: That information which the transceiver has encoded into symbols and sent via the channel with the intent of influencing the receiver.

Intentional Feedback: Those signs, verbal and non-verbal which the receiver intentionally sends to the sender to indicate receipt of the message and to make commentary on the message.

Unintentional Feedback: Those signs verbal and non-verbal, which

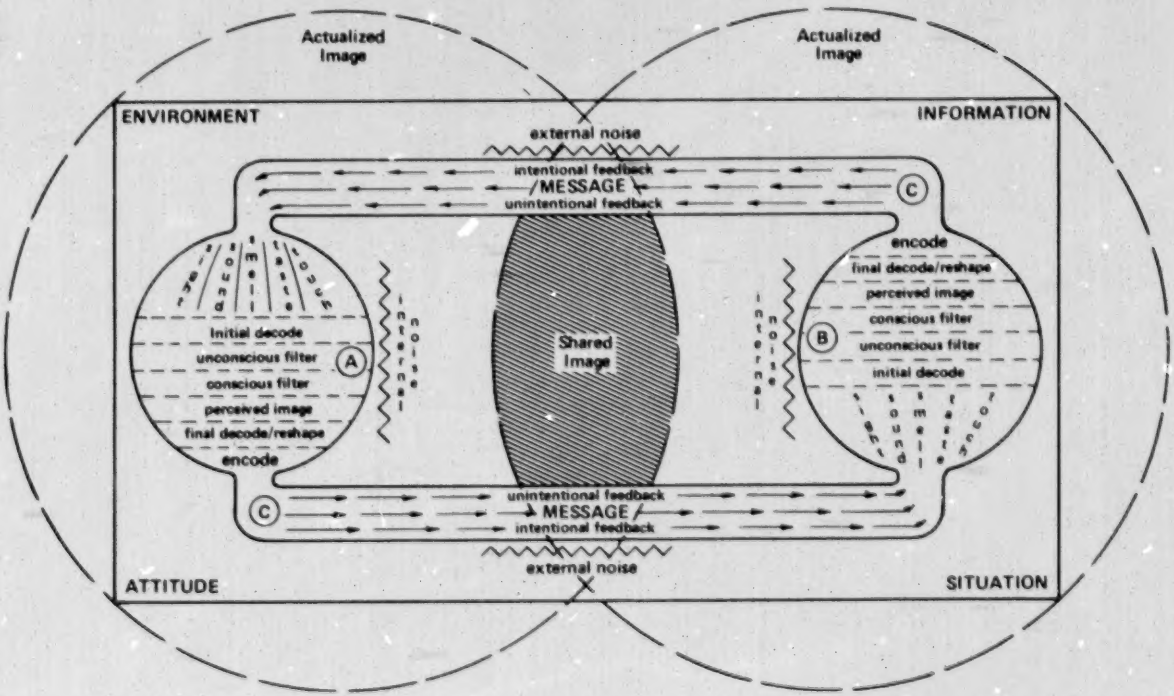
the behavior of the receiver sends to the sender as unintentional commentary on the message. Unintentional feedback is often the observable characteristics of the internal processes of the receiver.

The process in which these elements function is somewhat less complex than the definition of the elements. One of the transceivers is moved by a desire to communicate. The seat of this desire can usually be found in the EIAS Box. This stimulus is filtered through the internal processes of the transceiver, the message is encoded and sent to the receiver via the channel. The receiver perceives the message, distorted by external noise, through one or more of his receiver senses. The message is initially decoded and passes through the internal processes of the receiver, where it is subject to internal noise. The receiver then encodes his response and returns it via the channel. In this response the difference between a message and intentional feedback can be defined as follows: intentional feedback reflects the amount of agreement/disagreement with the original message; whereas a message would include new information or statements of position. This incoming feedback/message is received as a stimulus by the original sender who now repeats the process as a receiver.

Let us trace a communications situation through the model in an attempt to further clarify the process.

A and B are driving down the freeway, in B's car with B driving. A sees an "IMPEACH NIXON" bumper sticker. A, a conservative Republican decodes the symbols and they pass through his unconscious filter. The stimulus is augmented by the facts that the sticker is on an old VW bus being driven by a "freak." Already A is beginning to react negatively to the message. The message then passes through his conscious filter, part of which states that people who attack the President are attacking the country. This, in combination with his perceived image as a loyal, red, white and blue American causes A to finally decode and reshape the message as, "REVOLUTION NOW!" He gestures to the car and sends B the message, "Look at that car, stupid, hippy weirdo." B glances quickly at the bumper sticker. As A was talking a truck passed them on the other side so all that B heard of A's message was, "Look at that." External noise wiped out the rest of the message. B's senses decode the message and send it through his unconscious filter. B, a liberal Democrat, decodes the message as an anti-Nixon message, with both the statement and the gesture being supportive of the bumper sticker. The internal moise created by his preoccupation with freeway rush-hour driving, causes him to overlook the shared image overlap which contained some knowledge of A's political views. The message now passes through B's conscious filter, part of which states that the President, like any other citizen is bound by the laws of the land, and, in B's opinion there is a considerable question as to whether or

THE PARTICIPATORY IMAGE COMMUNCIATIONS MODEL



not all of Mr. Nixon's activities fall within those boundaries. This coupled with his perceived image as a strong civil libertarian causes him to finally decode and reshape A's message as, "They ought to impeach the President." So he encodes and sends the feedback/message, "Yea, they should have done it long ago."

The fact that this example reflects a faulty communication situation is irrelevant since the focus is the functioning of the process. Awareness of the process is the first step toward accurate utilization. Furthermore the effect of the images in this particular example is relatively unimportant. The concern must lie with the validity of the images. A and B are both preceeding from their own interpretations of the public image. The fact that they reach two totally different conclusions should not lead us to make a judgment of who is right; but rather should draw our concern to a societal reality seemingly devoid of a cohesive social theory. This lack of cohesion indicates a breakdown in the public image, and a necessary correlative breakdown in the public image, and a necessary correlative breakdown in private images.

The model itself is not a roadmap for constructing more accurate, stable images. It is rather an attempt to design a process by which we can discern the reality of our world more clearly. The present model and discussion leave many questions unanswered. How can you construct a conscious filter that is not merely a conscious restatement of the biases in the unconscious filter? How can you be certain that the information passed through the conscious filter has been stripped of all fallacy? In addition, participation in the process calls for extensive personal commitment and energy in the construction of a conscious filter.

Today we live in a paradoxical society; massed information provided in the name of clarity which seems only to confound. More than ever we need to create meaningful private and societal images. We have accepted the packaged images that fall daily into falsehood. A country must have a viable societal image since this is inextricably bound to the private image of the populace. It is time to re-examine both these images. Hopefully the model presented and the process it depicts will allow us to participate in the reconstruction of those images in a realistic and responsible manner.

References

[1] *The New York Times*, October 16, 1973.

[2] *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor, 1956), 5.

[3] *Ibid.*, 13-15.

[4] *Ibid.*, 64.

[5] *Ibid.*, 8-9.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York, 1971), 11-12.